ASPECTS OF LOVE

March 10, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Ephesians 2:4-10
John 3:14-21

**"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."** -John 3:16 (NSRV)

"'Do you remember,' she asked, 'that evening on my parents' front porch before we were married?'"

That's India Bridge asking the question, from Evan Connell's novel, Mr. Bridge, which, along with its companion novel, Mrs. Bridge, has been made into a thoughtful motion picture about a life-long relationship.

"The question demanded some kind of response. Mr. Bridge had worked late at the office and was tired and disliked this kind of coercion. He tried to think of what to say. He did not know what evening she was referring to.

"She smiled almost drowsily. 'You talked about Robert Ingersoll. You admired him...'

"'Oh good Lord,' Mr. Bridge remarked, and waved his hand to disparage whatever he had said that long ago.

"'You were so young. I've never forgotten. And before you went home you read some verses from The Rubaiyat. I've often wondered what became of that little book. What did you do with it?'

"'I have no idea,' he said. He hoped she would not go on reminiscing. He sat on the edge of the bed to take off his shoes.

"'Ever since that night I've loved The Rubaiyat.'

"'I'm afraid young men of a certain age are apt to get carried away.'

"As though she had not heard him, she said, 'Walter, I'm sure there's a copy of The Rubaiyat in the bookcase in the breakfast room.'

"'Oh, now. Now, wait just a moment,' he said, sitting erect with a strained expression and a shoe in one hand.

"'I suppose it is silly.'"

Mr. Bridge does not go downstairs to get the book, but Mrs. Bridge will not abandon the subject...

"'Walter, tell me the truth. Did you find me attractive?'

"He frowned. 'What on earth has gotten into you? All at once for no good reason you behave as if - I don't know what. You were an attractive girl and you are today an attractive woman.'

"'Am I?'

"'You are indeed.'

"She looked at him playfully. 'Would it hurt so much to tell me once in a while?'

"'I'm afraid I'm not good at that sort of business.'

"'You used to be.'

And then - the crux of the matter:

"'Tell me, Walter, because I need to know. Do you love me?'" [Mr. Bridge, North Point Press, p. 156-158]

It is the issue, isn't it? "I need to know. Do you love me?" Think of all the times the question is put: in music, literature, poetry, drama and popular entertainment. Most of the popular singing we do to one another is about love... and the question, "Do you love me?" For preachers, one of the great losses was the end of "All in the Family" because it was so full of relevant illustrations... many of them around this issue. One I remember occurred when Edith had been to see "Fiddler on the Roof" with her friends, and remembering that wonderful song she asks, "Archie, do you love me?" After he fusses and fumes he answers consistently, "I answer that question every day - by the fact that I live with you. I go to work. I come home..." But Archie, you recall, used to have a very difficult time saying it.

And surely one of the most poignant moments on the popular stage happens in the musical "Oliver" when the lonely and desperate little boy sings "Where is Love?"

Unrequited love, that powerful old literary and philosophic motif, as old as Dante and Beatrice, was at the heart, literally, of the Phantom's agony. American Episcopal theologian, Reuel Howe, put it this way:

> "Some of our wants are immediate and superficial, some of them are deeper; but the deepest one of all is the desire to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be one with us, and through whom we can find at-oneness with all." [Man's Need and God's Actions, p. 9]

We certainly spend a lot of time talking about it. Some spend their lives desperately looking for it. And if all else fails, we can always place an ad in the classifieds. I read that somewhere and last week did something I've never done before. I read them all in Chicago magazine.

> "Attractive SWF, enjoys cultural activities, seeks articulate, considerate, non-religious, politically liberal, SWM for conversation, friendship and possible long-term relationship. (Taste for country or folk music a plus), non-smoker please."
>
> "If you love to laugh, I will make you laugh! If you are open-minded, non-smoking, interested in companionship, I'm eccentric, into sports, movies, entertaining and adventure. Don't think about calling, Just Do It!"

And this month, a particular committed SWM, took out a full page ad and summed up his dream in the last sentence:

> "Ms. Almost Perfect who wants it all - Top Shelf and can reciprocate."

The essence of being loved is being valued, theologian Sallie McFague observes. That's a helpful insight; not simply being desired and desiring - but being valued. Although eros does, at its holiest and best - express value, the essence is the affirmation, the individuation which occurs when you are loved by someone. That's what India Bridge is asking for in her interrogation of her husband... and Edith Bunker and Oliver and the people who put ads in the classified section.

We know about the psychological evidence... that human beings need affirmation, value - in order to be healthy: that if you don't know you are valuable you will live your life trying to prove your worth... and not ever succeed because it can only be given to you.

We know the tragedy of poverty on the massive scale we have managed to produce - which leaves millions of people feeling valueless, and not surprisingly, behaving as if life, theirs and others, has no value. There

is nothing in human history like the level of violence which is a daily reality in the culture of poverty.

The poets who perhaps understand us best know that it is the difference between existing and truly living. To know you matter to someone - your lover, your boss, your friend, the bus driver, the policeman - is the difference between putting in time and being fully alive.

> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

That's what the sign means that the man with the funny hair holds up in the end zone or underneath the basket during the NCAA finals. John 3:16, which a lot of church people know because they memorized it in Sunday School ages ago, but a lot of people don't know. "The Gospel in Miniature," Martin Luther called this one small sentence. It is what we believe. It is the Christian faith.

It occurs as a kind of commentary on an incident the Gospel of John describes. A distinguished and important public figure came looking for Jesus one night. His name was Nicodemus. I like him. He is a gentleman, an astute politician; he is intellectually curious, theologically restless, and just mature enough to begin to take some risks - one of which is his being there, talking with Jesus. He asks some leading questions. And Jesus explains that while God gives the gift of life to all creatures, there is a fuller life - a deeper, more profound life which is a gift of God's spirit. To receive this gift is like another birth. And then Nicodemus fades from the text and the author begins his commentary:

"You see," he says to his readers, "God so loves the world, he gave his only son, so that people who believe in him, that is, people who receive what God gives, will be truly alive. They won't perish."

There are some very big and important and relevant ideas here.

God loves the world. God is a lover and God's beloved is the creation. We've invested a lot of paper and ink trying to attach conditions to that bold statement and sometimes we have simply explained it away into meaninglessness. Sometimes it has sounded as if we believed that it's not the whole world God loves, just our part of it. And we've always had trouble with the notion that it's the physical world, the world of matter, of tangible, physical reality, the world of human bodies and animals and earth that God loves.

And sometimes we've softened it by saying something like: well of course God doesn't really love, if by love you mean what I mean by love. If by "love" you mean something like that phenomenon which produces both the most profound ecstasy but also the deadliest pain in my life, you surely don't mean God feels that.

It is, very simply, the most radical theological idea anybody ever had. God loves the world.

God loves the world so much. God desires and needs the world. God hurts when the world hurts - every bit as profoundly as a parent hurts when a child is hurt; every bit as deeply as that mother in the Robert Taylor Homes hurts who last week saw her second son murdered in gang violence. God loves the world so much there is grief in heaven, when the world itself hurts. God is wounded by oil slicks in the oceans and black rain falling on Kuwait and Iraq. God loves the world so much there is a deep wound in God's heart that in the name of peace and justice and the future it appeared necessary to kill a lot of God's children recently. The boldest theological idea of all is very simply that God so loves the world.

But that isn't all. God loves the world so much that he gave an only son. This is not abstract love. This is not the divine love proposed by ancient philosophy: ethereal, detached, love in general, love from a distance.

This is passionate love, love so physical it has no way to express itself apart from a human life, a human body, which is born and lives and suffers and dies. A son is given. An only child is given up to death in order to express this love, so that all who believe will not perish but have eternal life.

"What about those who don't believe? Perish? God loves the world so much that those who don't get the message, or those who do get the message and don't like it, don't believe it, only half believe it, burn in hell eternally? Is that what we mean by perish? It's a stumbling block for many who can't equate God's love with eternal punishment. It has always been a fatal theological inconsistency to try to balance God's eternal love with an eternal hell of physical torment. But it is an item of belief some people seem to like a lot, assuming of course, that their place is reserved and confirmed, and their theological fire insurance paid.

It is a very major question, this business of what happens to people who don't believe - and if nothing happens to them what reason is there to be a Christian? So let's look at what the text actually says.

Perish. It doesn't say punish. The Greek, in fact, means to be "ruined" and it also means to be "lost." It is the same word the New Testament uses to describe the lostness of a lost sheep. When Jesus talked about people who do not accept God's love, it was usually in terms of being lost. It is the word Luke uses to describe the prodigal, wandering aimlessly in a far country, separated from his home. So, I'd propose that perishing if you don't believe does not mean, nor never has meant, being condemned to a tormenting hell. It does mean missing the fullness of life. It means living in the kind of exile Psalm 137 so poignantly describes. It does mean living in separation from the best life available to us and in that sense it means refusing to be fully alive.

It's not that the gift of love is withheld from the unfaithful. It's just that you don't have a gift until you receive it, unwrap it and enjoy it and laugh about it and love receiving it. You don't have a gift you don't know about - or know about but don't want, or accept. Unfaith - unbelief - is, Christianly speaking, not accepting the gift of love that has been given to you.

And that doesn't cause the lover to stop loving - not if it's real love we're talking about.

> "One of the characteristics of genuine love is that it endures," says Sallie McFague. "Genuine love is faithful through all manners of barriers and difficulties, finding the beloved valuable even when others may not."
>
> "The great lovers are the unsung and unknown faithful ones, the ones who, no matter what, continue to find the beloved valuable beyond all reasons that can be given." [Models of God, p. 132]

Genuine love is costly. If you have ever loved you know that. If you have loved a pet or a baseball team or another human being, really loved, you have experienced vulnerability, pain, heartbreak, disappointment. So the love that prompts God to give the son, costs deeply and dearly.

The cross is its symbol. "God so loved the world" points to the central event of the Christian story and the day toward which the Lenten season moves. The cross is God loving the world.

To love is to be vulnerable. To accept the gift of love is to be alive. To accept God's love, a love which is forever, a love more powerful than death, is to have now new life, it is to be alive now, to have eternal life.

There is, finally, to close this matter, a decision to make.

Love does not coerce, manipulate, or determine. Love, rather, respects, values ultimately and absolutely, the beloved.

> "Love consists in this," a poet said beautifully, "that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other." [Letters to a Young Poet, Ranier Maria Rilke, p. 78]

So precisely because God so loves you, God protects and respects your integrity and will not coerce. But in order to receive what is given, in order to have it, to have that quality and depth of life which happens when you know yourself valued, you have to at least open your hands and your heart and allow it.

This love invites you, graciously, to say yes - to see yourself in a way you have never dared to think of yourself before, as God's beloved, to sing about -

> "...love unknown,
> My Savior's love to me,
> Love to the loveless shown.
> That they might lovely be."

And to begin in the miracle of that love, to be alive. Amen.